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THE CONVERSATION

UK beta

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14 June 2013, 3.00pm BST

UK citizenship test is inconsistent and riddled with errors



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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Thom Brooks does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

When I took the UK citizenship test in 2009, I got the number of MPs in the House of Commons wrong, not because I didn't know the answer, but because the Home Office didn't.

Preparing for the test was subject of increasing curiosity mixed with incredulity as yet another "correct" answer provided in the handbook was found to be false. Passing the test was more about remembering what the Home Office wanted to hear than what was, in fact, true.



How many MPs? Don't rely on the citizenship test for an answer – you'll fail. PA Wire

By this time, there had been a growing crisis surrounding the test's use since 2007.

With this in mind, the government launched a new, third edition of the test this past spring. The edition is more readable and user-friendly full of colour photographs in a more attractive text. It also corrects existing mistakes – sometimes by removing information altogether. The problem of incorrect numbers of MPs in Westminster has been omitted.

But here are still serious problems with the test, as my research has shown.

Inconsistence, mistakes, gender imbalance

One issue is inconsistency. We need no longer know the number of MPs in the House of Commons, but must still know the number of representatives in the Welsh Assembly, Scottish Parliament and Northern Ireland Assembly.

There are other mistakes: we must know the number to book a visit at the House of Commons, Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament, but not the Northern Ireland Assembly. Why must we know some of these things (if at all) and not the others?

My report also uncovers a serious problem with the test handbook's claims it will help applicants "integrate into society and play a full role in your local community". The new test handbook no longer requires applicants to know how to contact emergency services, report a crime or register with a GP. The new test does require knowledge about the approximate age of Big Ben and the height of the London Eye in feet and metres. The emergency number 999 is not included.

The test has moved from asking practical trivia to the purely trivial. Applicants must know about 3,000 facts including the following dates in the life of Sake Dean Mahomet: birth (1759), arrival in the UK (1782), eloping to Ireland (1786), first curry house opening (1810) and death (1851) in addition to having to know his wife's name (Jane Daly), her nationality (Irish), name of his curry house (the Hindoostane Coffee House) and street location (George Street, London).

As if this weren't enough, the test also suffers from gender imbalance. The handbook chapter on British history includes the dates of birth for 29 men, but only four women. Neither of the Queen's birthdays is included. No women artists, musicians or poets are mentioned.

A further serious problem is the impractical and ineffective strategy concerning the test and English language proficiency. All previous test versions have taken satisfactory completion as sufficient evidence of required English language proficiency for permanent settlement. However, the government has announced that applicants will have to sit an additional English language test from October 2013.

The new third edition of the Life in the UK citizenship is a missed opportunity riddled with mistakes. My new report includes 12 recommendations for a fourth edition.

I recommend the need to address errors, inconsistencies and gender imbalance. I also recommend the test become informed by consultation and evidence. Perhaps the most serious failing is that this test – an integral part of immigration policy – has not received any serious consultation with applicants, specialists and academics since its launch about a decade ago.

I don't think the problem is that the test contains difficult questions. Instead, the issue is its content. Are we more concerned about new residents not knowing how to contact emergency services or knowing when Emperor Claudius launched the Roman invasion of Britain (43 AD, in case you didn't already know)? We should have a test that ensures new residents can make a positive contribution to society.

Finally, we must reconsider what purpose the test should serve for immigration policy and learn from the available evidence about how to further these goals. For a policy area widely trumpeted as highly important for citizens and policy-makers, it is shocking how little attention has been paid to the serious problems found in the Life in the UK test. It is time for the government to wake up to these problems and take action.

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